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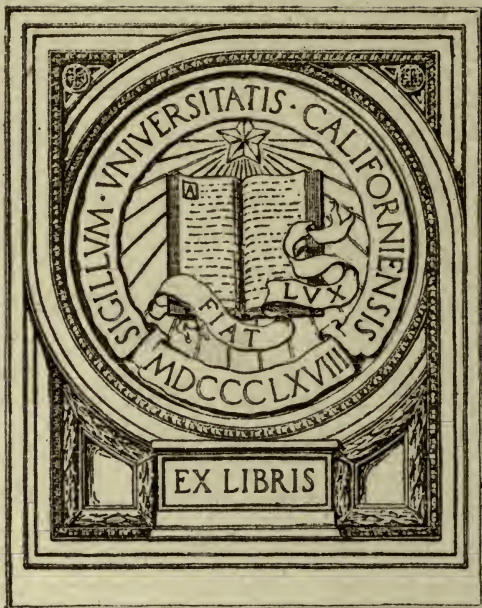
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THE BRITISH ACADEMY

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

VII

‘Is there a Poetic View of the  
World?’

By

C. H. Herford, Litt.D.

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# WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

## VII

### IS THERE A POETIC VIEW OF THE WORLD?

By C. H. HERFORD, Litt.D.

*Read* November 24, 1916

'VIEW of the World' is a clumsy phrase for an idea which itself has for most of us an unattractive flavour of pedantry. This latter impression is hardly removed by a knowledge of the part which, under the neater and more expressive term *Weltanschauung*, it has played in German literary study. *Weltanschauung* is the indispensable final chapter without which no German biography, the confidential disclosure without which no German friendship, is complete. A *Weltanschauung* or 'World-view', in its full scope, comprehends ideas about life of quite distinct categories; it touches metaphysics and science, ethics and aesthetics; it offers an answer to Faûst's question 'what it is that at bottom holds the world together', but also to the practical questions, what is the end of action and how we ought to act.

Historically, we know, the answers to these questions occur, in great part, as successive steps in continuous or closely-connected processes of thought. But between these continuous processes yawn gulfs which no argument can bridge. From Bacon through Hobbes to Locke we can trace something like a connected development. But between Hobbes and his contemporary Boehme there is a cleavage due not to bad reasoning on either side, but to a radical difference in the kind of experience from which the reasoning in the two cases set out. And the history of belief indicates that there are at least two types of elemental experience which thus generate ideas about the world, and to which two great classes of World-view in essence correspond. These may be distinguished as the *religious* and the *philosophical*. In the first, thought is dominated by the consciousness of a power or powers distinct from man, controlling his fate, protecting his country or his tribe, determining his moral code, his scheme of values, and his expectations after death. From the crudest fetishism and animism to the loftiest

theism, a living relation to such a Power is the root fact from which the religious World-view takes its origin and derives its character.

On the other hand, we find a vast and complex body of conceptions of the world which do not originate in intercourse with a divine Power, or in the fear or hope which such a power may inspire, but in the effort to give a finally and universally valid account of experience.

Naturally, neither these nor any other type of World-view, if such there be, are mutually exclusive in substance and content. Religion may reach the conclusions of philosophy, and philosophy those of religion, each by a path strictly its own. Historically, the two attitudes to life have intimately interacted; and if the religious type has on the whole shown less power of resistance to the penetration of ideas of the opposed type, on the other hand modern philosophy, in particular, has often built upon, and not seldom with, ideas first begotten not by speculative curiosity, but by the rapture or the agony of God-intoxicated or demon-haunted souls. The eternal war of Ormuzd and Ahriman still echoes in the Hebraic intensity of our distinction between good and evil; and the visionary ecstasies of the mystics were of account in the evolution of philosophic pantheism. And, similarly, the edifices of theology have borrowed fortifying buttresses or indispensable pillars from ideas evolved by scientific reason or a purely secular interpretation of good. Aristotle, applied and interpreted by Aquinas, became one of the masters, not only of those who know, but of those who believe. Nevertheless, the two types have, on a comprehensive survey, stood distinctly apart; and their ramifications appear to dominate between them the entire field of belief and speculative thought.

Is it possible, nevertheless, to distinguish a third type of 'World-view' analogous to these? In other words, is there any third kind of experience, distinct from that of either religion or philosophy, yet involving an apprehension of reality comparable in originality, and possibly in importance, with theirs? The present essay is based upon the view that such an experience is given in and by poetry.<sup>1</sup>

## I

For the specific experience which comes to a poet through poetry, however it may be interwoven with religious or philosophic ideas, has a radically different psychological origin and character. It is equally intense and absorbing, but it is not determined by conscious relation

<sup>1</sup> The distinction of a religious, philosophic, and poetic World-view is based upon W. Dilthey: *Das Wesen der Philosophie: Weltanschauungslehre* (Hinneberg, *Kultur der Gegenwart*, I. vi).



to an outer power, and it seeks to express rather than to explain. It is neither transfigured fear or hope, nor yet a logical process. In the making of a poem there may be even a conscious detachment from actuality, and the poet may float free in a dream world, apparently without thought of the world which he inhabits. The poetic may well be thought to differ from the religious or the philosophic types of experience less in inducing any specific way of contemplating reality than in liberating us from the necessity or desire to contemplate it at all.

Yet it is certain that the poet's detachment, even in his most ethereal dream-flights, from reality, is only apparent. In all the spontaneous and seemingly arbitrary movement of his mind among its crowding ideal shapes, reality through his stored-up experience is at work, quietly weaving a thousand subtle filiations between the poem and the life of men at large. *Othello* is much farther from 'actuality' than the poor novel on which its story was based; but it is penetrated with the vision of life, of which Cinthio's tale caught so feeble and fugitive a glimpse. What distinguishes poetic from religious or philosophic apprehension is not that it turns away from reality, but that it lies open to and in eager watch for reality at doors and windows which with them are barred or blind. The poet's soul resides, so to speak, in his senses, in his emotions, in his imagination, as well as in his conscious intelligence; and we may provisionally describe poetic apprehension as an intense state of consciousness in which all these are vitally concerned. In so far as a particular outlook upon the world is founded upon a particular type of experience, a poet's World-view will be radically affected by his senses, emotions, imagination. The flower which Wordsworth contemplated on the bank or by the lake, and that other which Tennyson with his more curious scrutiny plucked from the crannied wall, could stir these poets' intellect and heart to the depths; and their apprehension, as poets, of God and man, of Nature, of Duty, would have been different without it.

But in any case, it will be said, even if we grant that poetic experience tends to induce some way of regarding reality, it cannot possibly induce any constant or definable way, if elements of mind so infinitely diverse, so individual, as emotion and imagination, are vitally concerned in the process. That energizing of mind released from the control of actuality, which we call imagination, that free following out of trains of suggestion called up by emotion, takes the colour, at every step, of the individual make of the poet's nature, and the individual cast of his experience. In so far as a World-view is

strictly poetic in origin, the conclusion might seem hard to resist that there may be as many poetic World-views as there are poets. And it is true that the individual quality of the poet will always cleave to whatever is strictly poetic in his thinking. But even so, it may be possible to determine typical directions in which poetic apprehension tends to engender or to sway belief, and to modify ideas imbibed in education or accepted on authority.

Thus, it may be provisionally laid down that a view of the World reached through poetic experience will tend to accentuate those aspects of Man and Nature, and those ways of regarding them, which offer most scope, analogy, or sanction, to this type of experience. Where the senses play a vital part, and are yet vitally implicated with passion and ideas, there will be little disposition to doctrines which either brand the senses as evil or illusory, or erect them into a sufficing faith. The logical intellect, its processes and conclusions, will receive a respectful but distant salute, while the irrational elements of life are accepted as its needful ingredients or even as a supreme source of its worth. Love, which tramples on reason, and, in the great words of à Kempis, warmly glows like a flame beyond all measure, may be called in some sense the natural religion of the poet. The mysterious love of man and woman, in particular, irrelevant to most of the problems of philosophy, and regarded by religion chiefly as a dangerous disturbing force, is one of the perennial springs of poetry, and one of the shaping analogies of poetic thought. And the same impassioned insight which gives significance to this love exalts also all those other energies of the soul which carry men out of and beyond themselves. Poetry is naturally heroic; it has presided over the cult of the hero, as religion and philosophy over those of the saint and the sage; it has rewarded him with enchanting secular Paradises, Elysian fields, Isles of the Blest, and Temples of Fame. Poetry is disposed to magnify human nature; the transition from Aeschylus, who painted men greater than they were, to Euripides, who drew them after life, is also a decline in the intrinsic temper of poetry, if in that alone. And because of its bent to think greatly of man, it makes for the assertion, in the great sense, of *freedom*—of man's freedom to be himself. Neither the shibboleths of political freedom nor those of free thought have always, it is true, found response among poets. Their part has rather been to keep alive in mankind the temper which treats outward obstacles not as the soul's constraints, but as its opportunities; the faith that iron bars do not make a cage, and that you may be bounded in a nutshell, and yet not only count yourself, but be, a king of infinite space.



In the interpretation of Nature, poetic experience works creatively or selectively on similar lines. To those wonderful deposits of the imagination of the past, the myths of extinct faiths, from which theology and philosophy have long withdrawn their sanction, or on which they have laid their taboo, the poets have habitually been very tender. And when they felt as poets, the image drawn from a myth has never had merely decorative value, or served merely as a 'poetic synonym' for the exact term. It expressed something in the poet's vision not otherwise to be put into words. If the glorious anthropomorphism of Olympus and Asgard has faded for ever, the mystery of life everywhere pulsing through Nature, and perpetually reborn in 'Man and beast and earth and air and sea', cries to the poet with a voice which will not be put by; and the symbols by which he seeks to convey his sense of it, if they read personality too definitely into the play of that elusive mystery, yet capture something in it which escapes the reasoned formulas of science.

Hence many great philosophic ideas about the universe which, without ascribing life or mind to it, might seem projected from our inner, rather than gathered from our outer, experience, have powerfully appealed to poets. The antithesis of the One and the Many, which fascinated and fertilized every phase of Greek thought, had one of its roots in the acute Greek feeling for continuity through change, which is equally manifest in the Parthenon and in the Pindaric Ode, and to a less degree in all art and poetry wherever the sense of rhythm is present at all. 'When we feel the poetic thrill,' says Santayana, 'is it not that we find sweep in the concise, and depth in the clear?' That felicitously expresses the genius of Hellenic art in particular; but it also marks off the specifically poetic apprehension of Oneness as a 'something deeply interfused' in and through the living multiplicity of the world, alike from the mystic vision of a One whose splendour dissolves the reality of things, and from the vision of Peter Bell, for whom nothing but 'things' exists. Yet even this pregnant Oneness has commonly gathered, in the poetic conception of the universe, the higher and richer attribute of soul-life. It has become a living and working Nature vitally implicated in every organ and filament, or Mind diffused through every limb, or Love, or Beauty, or Power, woven through the woof of it, or the splendour of God irradiating it through and through.

When we turn, as is proposed in what follows, from these general considerations to watch the actual operation of poetic apprehension in concrete examples, we naturally encounter some serious difficulties.

Poetic apprehension may be as distinct and definable as we will, but it can rarely be caught acting *in vacuo*. Poets are men; they are usually citizens; they are often penetrated with some form of religious or philosophical faith. It is inevitable, in such cases, that their strictly poetic experience should be coloured or even overridden by ideas proper to their possibly more habitual or more deeply established persuasions. In poets like Goethe and Shelley, deeply concerned with the issues of life outside poetry, philosophic and poetic impulses and data may well seem inextricably mingled. Even Blake and Whitman, who perhaps come nearer than any other moderns to shaping out a poetic World-view for themselves, evidently worked, as poets, under a deep bias of revolutionary dogma, which made them unjust to some aspects of poetry itself. And with poet-exponents of great theological or philosophical systems, like Lucretius or Dante, it may well appear idle to seek to catch the moment when the runnel of poetry carved out a watercourse of its own, instead of falling into and moving along with the great tide of Epicurean or Catholic thought. Yet we attach some meaning to our words when we distinguish periods in which the poetic element in a poet's nature was more potent than at others. When we say, for instance, that in Shelley the poetic apprehension after 1812 worked itself progressively free from an alien philosophy; or that in Wordsworth, from about the same date, it became progressively overlaid by a theology almost equally alien; or that in Dante's *Convito*, the poet of the *Vita Nuova*, who will finally recover dominance in the *Commedia*, has yielded much ground to the scholastic thinker. Distinctions so clearly felt and sharply drawn cannot be groundless. What is here proposed is to examine whether any typical character or direction can be discovered in the modifications which the data of religious or philosophical beliefs and ideals have undergone in certain commanding poet natures. In that case we might possess some of the material for answering the question I have been bold enough to suggest in the title of this paper.

## II

I begin with examples in which these data are derived from *religion*; and, in the first place, from religion still untouched by philosophic reflection. Without rashly assuming the solution of unsolved or insoluble problems, one may venture to assert that the Homeric epics owe their present form neither to purely religious awe nor merely to conscious and deliberate artistry, but to a poetic apprehension of the world operating upon the data of the savage cults and rituals, the animism, totemism, and magic, which anthropology is



gradually deciphering under the palimpsest of their obliterating splendour. With some aspects of the process we are not here concerned. If 'Homer', as many modern scholars suppose, disliked human sacrifice and similar barbarities, and tempered or effaced the record of them, he reflects the growing efficacy of civilized, but not necessarily of poetic, ideas. It is otherwise with the transformation, whatever its precise nature and history, which put the defined character and rich personal accent of the Homeric Olympus in place of the psychological fluidity and incoherence of primitive religion. For the childhood of poetry the change possibly involved a loss. A world where there are no barriers, or none which magic cannot dissolve, where gods and men and beasts pass over into one another without resistance or demur, where everything can be done and had if the right formula be pronounced and the due charm applied—such a world is the home and habitat of the fairy tale; but its facile instability must be overcome before a mature poetry, no less certainly than before a mature science, can arise. The Homeric outlook upon the world had as a religion grave flaws, which merited the strictures of later moralists; but it had also, as a religion, magnificent qualities to which they rarely did justice. His deathless figures permanently raised the status of man and the ideals of human achievement; and every line of the poetry is instinct with an assurance of the glory of the world and the goodness of life, and the nobility of heroic enterprise, and of reverence and of pity, which justly made his book the Bible of later Greece.

Yet it is plain that even Homer reflects or finds reflection in but a limited tract of the Greek mind; that there were many deeper, as well as darker, currents in the Greek way of apprehending the world, of which that radiant mirror shows no trace. Humanity had triumphed over the superhuman as well as over the subhuman, clarity over mystery as well as over confusion. The Ionian thinkers of the sixth century swept away the fables of Olympus, fastened on the problem of substance, and proclaimed the sublime discovery that the All is One. The Orphic cults and the Thracian orgies of Dionysus betrayed by the widespread and intimate hold which they won in Greek life, refined and humanized as they doubtless were, that religion in Greece too included the riot of intoxicated rapture as well as clear-eyed piety; the Bacchic frenzy, which carries men beyond themselves, as well as temperate self-reverence and self-control. Both these new elements enriched and uplifted, if at some points they also impoverished and degraded, Greek mentality and the Greek apprehension of the world, religious, philosophic, and poetic alike. The philosophic apprehension



of unity reacted on religion, and the two strains coalesced in the sublime theism of Cleanthes' hymn. The Dionysiac rapture reacted on philosophy—without it should we have had the great doctrine proclaimed in the *Phaedrus*, of the divine vision won through madness and love? And both reacted upon poetry—above all on tragedy, with its stringent ideal of unity, maintained and manifested through all the phases and moods of conflict, and the alliance, disclosed in its very structure, of Apolline clarity and order with the lyric exaltation of Dionysus. But the matter of tragedy shows yet more evidently the larger and deeper World-view which poetry has now won. In passing from Homer to Aeschylus we enter an atmosphere in which the gods are hardly ever visible, but which is laden and tense with the sense of divine things. His persons, it was said, are more than human; certainly his gods are sometimes—like the Zeus of the *Prometheus*—less than divine. But the Aeschylean universe has outgrown Olympus without having dispossessed it. A soul of immense reach and depth, apprehending life from many sides, but always with a sense of vast issues and inexhaustible import, here interprets the old stories of man's relations with the gods, and leaves us with a new vision of the possibilities and responsibility of man. His tragic conflicts call incommensurate forces into play, and their apparent solution leaves yet larger problems unsolved. The story of Prometheus ended with his reconciliation to Zeus; and this doubtless expressed the poet's deliberate intention and design. The modern world has remembered Prometheus, not for his final surrender or appeasement, but as the assertor and embodiment of something in man which stands over against the gods he recognizes, and not only endures unflinchingly all that their utmost anger can inflict, but arraigns them himself before a law of Justice higher than their own. Aeschylus, we know, was a devoutly religious man, and never dreamed of surrendering his reverence for the divine because of the crimes of the gods. Possibly, as Wilamowitz has suggested, he believed that divinity itself had passed through a youth 'full of foolish noise' to become with ripening years a righteous God and Father, worthy at length of universal reverence. Reverence for such an erring divinity is hardly distinguishable from forgiveness; in any case it foreshadows, if it does not announce, the clear recognition of human responsibility. And that recognition is already dominant in the mature work of Aeschylus. The traditional superstitions which still entangled the Greek mind—the doctrine of an irresistible fate, or of a divine jealousy attending human greatness—dissolve under the scrutiny of his terrible insight. Man is free even in his crimes, and the greater because he is free.

Clytaemnestra chooses and wills as freely as Lady Macbeth; she is as little the helpless victim of the curse of Atreus as the other of the Witches' spell. It needed a great poet thus to embrace in his vision of life things incompatible to common sense. 'Whether Aeschylus is greater', declares the penetrating interpreter to whom I have referred, 'when he uplifts our hearts by the full tones of surrender to the divine, or when he thrills us with the terrible acts and sufferings of human freewill, every one must decide for himself from his own experience; but let no one say that he understands the poet until he has known them both.'<sup>1</sup> The poet's eye, 'glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven', overcomes the antinomies of theological dogma; and herein lies one of the most signal services which poetic apprehension has rendered to thought, and not least to religion.

To pass from Aeschylus to Dante is to watch operations of poetic intelligence in which only the environment, the material, and the instruments of expression are profoundly changed. The words just quoted of the Greek might apply without the alteration of a syllable to the Florentine; and if ever poet saw earth and heaven at once it was he. But the theological World-view which he found was more authoritatively established, more intellectual in its philosophical substance, and more rich and beautiful in its human appeal. The fresh fountain of religious feeling, still abundantly flowing, was fortified and entrenched within a vast structure of elaborated dogma, for which councils and saints had supplied the architects and the masons, and ancient philosophy the stones. Within this imposing edifice, nevertheless, Dante, with complete conviction, found and made his home. No one now questions the absoluteness of Dante's Catholic faith, and we should seek in vain for any rebellious upsurging of the poet in him against the starkest of scholastic abstractions. On the contrary, his wonderful gift of style continually finds the material for poetry in the most seemingly arid regions. Sometimes the result is merely an astonishing *tour de force*; but often we become aware that Dante has not only invented but discovered, and that many a dogma which has the air of being the mere husk of religion is in reality the imperfect, stammering utterance through which religious passion sought to make itself articulate. Dante, in short, makes us feel in these constructions of the intellect the language of the soul.

To do this needed something more than devout belief. It needed the imaginative intuition of a poet. The poetry of Dante was distinguished from that of his older contemporaries above all by being

<sup>1</sup> Wilamowitz, *Oresteia*, p. 47.



just this intense soul-vision put into words. 'I simply write down what Love within dictates.'<sup>1</sup> Psychological veracity never fails him. Allegory, in so many hands a tissue of personified abstractions, becomes, in his, a living image of humanity. Symbolic meanings and applications interweave and encircle it, but the core is real. His vision is only on the surface a description—necessarily speculative—of the fortunes of souls after death; its substance, as he tells us, is 'man of his freewill choosing good or evil here'. The human denizens of his hell and purgatory and paradise have undergone no inner change; they are the men he had known, in their spiritual habits as they lived; and their fate, when Dante is thinking most as a poet and least as a theologian, is a continuation of their crucial actions. That Paolo and Francesca are immersed in unquenchable flames satisfies the theological idea of retribution; Dante inflicts on them the more searching penalty of being for ever locked in the embrace of their illicit love. And how often, when he thinks he is devoutly following out to the last consequence the Church's dogma of eternal punishment, he is unconsciously testifying to the poet's sublime faith in the soul of man as stronger than death and hell. 'Who is he', asks Dante, looking upon Capaneo (*Inf.* xiv. 46), 'who seems not to heed the flame, but lies fiercely unsubdued by the fiery vein?' Or the yet greater picture of Farinata (*Inf.* x. 35), defiantly erect where the rest grovel in agony, 'as if he held hell in great disdain'. Even the criminals whom the poet most abhors, and thrusts into the very depths of the abyss, even the traitors guilty of the death of Caesar or of Christ, he allows still to show greatness of soul; Brutus, champed to a bloody foam in the jaws of Lucifer, is still the Stoic philosopher, and though he writhes in agony, utters not a word (*Inf.* xxxiv. 66). And how wonderfully in the great Ulysses scene (*Inf.* xxvi) the poet takes the pen out of the hand of the theologian, and, forgetting the 'fraud' for which the captor of Troy is doing penance in hell, compels us to listen entranced to his tale of that last voyage, beyond the sunset, of the old wanderer, still insatiable of experience, who had kindled his shrinking comrades by bidding them 'Consider of what seed ye are sprung; ye were not made to live like the brute beasts, but to follow after virtue and knowledge'. Strange words to issue from the quenchless flames of hell! But Dante goes beyond this. For the sake of the heroism of Cato, he flatly violates the theological categories which condemned him to hell, and makes him the guardian of Purgatory.<sup>2</sup> As for the rest of the 'virtuous heathen', he cannot

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* xxiv. 52. 4.

<sup>2</sup> The case of Trajan, who for his justice was said to have been saved by the



indeed transfer them from the hell to which the Church has assigned them—a hell much more ferocious than any of which they had dreamed—to Elysium. But he does what he may, and he provides for them within the precincts of hell an Elysium of green lawns and running streams, ‘the one place in the Inferno where there is light and air’ (*Inf.* iii). The theological ethic of sin is thus unconsciously crossed, again and again, by the poetic ethic for which ‘good’ means greatness of soul.

Moreover, with a depth of spiritual insight strangely in contrast with the vulgar notion of punishment which dictated the theological hell, Dante has asserted, even in this realm of iron necessity, the freedom of man. The inmates of hell are not convicts condemned and punished for sins long since repented of: they are there of their own motion and by their own will; and if there is no hope there, it is not because God has no mercy, but because they cannot repent. The souls in Purgatory are held there by no compulsion; they desire nothing but to be purified of their sins, and the moment they desire to mount to Paradise, that moment they are free.

It would be strange, then, had Dante, with all his sense of supreme cosmic forces, not stood for the faith that man is yet the ‘captain of his soul’. There he is at one with Aeschylus and Milton, and the other great theological poets of the West. Man’s ‘freedom’ is a root idea of the Comedy; and not merely because its purpose was to show him ‘in the exercise of freewill’, determining his fate hereafter. Dante went much farther than this. A devoted Catholic and citizen, and eager to welcome the authority both of Church and State, he was driven by the corruption of the one and the anarchy of the other to seek ‘another way’—the way of spiritual self-help with the aid of philosophy and theology, along which he is led by Vergil and Beatrice. The great farewell words with which Vergil leaves him in the Earthly Paradise, ‘I crown and mitre thee king and bishop over thyself’, express with thrilling power the individualist—nay, the revolutionary—side of his thought. He would not have been the great poet he was if it had been the only side. Dante’s reverence for Vergil and for Beatrice is of the very substance of his self-assertion; he has crowned and mitred himself by taking them for his guides, and the result is the great poetic cosmos eloquent beyond all the other masterpieces of the world of devout discipleship, and yet instinct in every line with

prayers of Gregory, is not quite parallel, since there was here a theological tradition in his favour. But at least Dante seizes on and emphasizes the tradition, and not merely ‘saves’ Trajan, but makes him the comrade of the glorious just kings in Jupiter (*Par.* xx. 44 f.).

the ardour of a soul 'voyaging through strange seas of thought alone'.

But the name of Beatrice points to another aspect of Dante's work on which the impress of the poet in him is yet more unmistakably set. Measured by the range and compass of thought, and by the richness and delicacy of feeling, which the term in his usage conveys, Dante is the first, as he is the greatest, of the poets of Love. His poetry recovers and renews, or at the least suggests and recalls, all the varieties of intellectual and emotional experience for which philosophy, religion, and romance had, before his time, found in 'Love' the final expression, or the speaking symbol. The cosmic love (*φιλία*) by which Empedocles had first interpreted the universal phenomena which we still, hardly less anthropomorphically, know as 'attraction'; the passion for another human being (*ἔρως*) in which the author of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* discovered one of the sources of the divine exaltation which emancipates men from their human limits, and endows them with the vision of reality; the love of God for man, and of man for God (*ἀγάπη*), proclaimed as the very core of Christianity in the Fourth Gospel—these three types of love, all denoted for Dante by *Amor*, *amore*,<sup>1</sup> were conjoined in his experience with a fourth, distinct from all, though nearly allied to the second: the romantic love of woman which had been the chief inspiration of the poetry of Provence, and which, however sublimated and spiritualized, is enshrined in the *Vita Nuova*. To say that Dante's mind, equally powerful in analysis and in synthesis, confounds these distinctions would be unjust; but it would be equally untrue to assert that their associations are never blended. Christian philosophy had itself absorbed the first; cosmic attraction then reappeared in a sublime apotheosis, as the love which draws all the universe towards God, and by which God, as its source, 'moves the sun and the other stars'. And if Dante, in his treatise on poetry,<sup>2</sup> distinguishes himself from the poets of 'love' as a poet of 'morals', or 'righteousness', he also, as we saw, ascribes his whole power as a poet to his writing what love dictated in his heart. Man in virtue of his freedom has power to misuse Love, and Dante everywhere scornfully contrasts the higher and the baser love. Nay, all sin which can be 'purged away' he regards

<sup>1</sup> The second type I take to be represented, with obvious differences, for Dante by the 'philosophical' love of Guido Guinicelli, the 'father of love poets and my own' (*Purg.* xxvi. 97); there is no evidence that he knew anything of this part of Plato; in any case, of course, this love is for him excited only by woman. The *amore* of Empedocles is mentioned in *Inf.* xii. 42; Empedocles himself, as well as Plato, is in Limbo (*Inf.* iv. 138).

<sup>2</sup> *De Vulg. Eloq.* ii. 2.



as due to 'love' wrongly used; the whole population of Purgatory is there because it loved unwisely, or loved indifferent things too well, or right things too little. But the harm here, for Dante, arises not from love, but from the application to it of the evil material in man's nature—'as a foul impress may be set upon the most precious wax.'<sup>1</sup>

Something of the idealizing atmosphere which Christianity and Plato had thrown about love thus always colours it in Dante's mind. But it is also subtly touched with that other idealizing force which not Christianity but the poets had recognized, which Christian ethics had contemptuously tolerated or scornfully tabooed. Dante had known the love of woman in many forms. Longing for the absent wife and child had consumed his flesh and his bones in exile;<sup>2</sup> and his virginal adoration of Beatrice sprang from no coldness of the blood. The power of womanhood to lift men to supreme heights of vision and fortitude, which he had divined through Beatrice and sung in the great canzone of the *Vita Nuova*,<sup>3</sup> no more passed out of his faith than did her image from his memory. If the Comedy is a great scheme of salvation, it is also a great song of womanhood such as, he said, no man ever sang before; and if we say that Beatrice is there a symbol for Theology, that is doubtless true: but a thousand phrases remind us how much she symbolizes besides; and the look 'in the eyes of Beatrice', which draws Dante upward through the circling spheres of Paradise to the beatific vision, attests also his faith in the power of the lover's adoration to lift a man out of his humanity (*trasumanar*), and make him 'joyful even in the flames'.

Thus Dante, though he counted himself not among the poets of love, but among the poets of 'righteousness', is one of the inspiring sources of the modern poetry which invests the love of man and woman with the ideal attributes which philosophy and religion had proclaimed in other forms of love, but had ignored or repudiated in this. In Spenser—Platonist, Christian, and lover at once—the fusion of the three strains is complete; his great hymns to Love, who

is lord of all the world by right,  
And ruleth all things by his powerful saw,

prelude his even greater hymn of marriage. Even Chaucer perhaps learnt from Dante that amazed awe with which, in the opening lines of one of his earliest Italianate poems, he contemplates the 'wonderful working' of love.<sup>4</sup> The Petrarchists and Sonneteers went far to reduce the expression of this love to hollow phrase-making. But with

<sup>1</sup> *Purg.* xviii. 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Canz.* i.

<sup>2</sup> *Canz.* xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Parlement of Fowles*, 1 f.



Romanticism it found fresh and original utterance, and its status in the world has never been more loftily affirmed than by Celtic Romanticizing poets of to-day. 'I say that Eros is a being!' declares one of the finest spirits among them. 'It is more than a power of the soul, though it is that also. It has a universal life of its own.'<sup>1</sup>

### III

The power of personality and the glory of love: these have emerged from our discussion thus far as the things in life whose appeal to poetic intelligence was most potent in modifying the substance or changing the perspective of a World-view derived from religion. We have now to examine, in a fashion unavoidably even more fragmentary and summary, the reaction of another series of poetic minds upon the more complex and abstruse World-views of *philosophy*.

It is necessary for the purpose to adopt a rough grouping of philosophic systems, and I take the following division into three fundamental types, based with qualifications upon one proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey in the essay already referred to.

To the first belong the naturalistic schools, from Democritus to Hobbes and the Encyclopedists, deriving their philosophical conceptions directly or indirectly from an analysis of the physical world, and commonly disdaining or ignoring phenomena not to be so explained. To the second type of thinkers the objective world is still the absorbing subject of contemplation; but it is approached not from the side of physics, but from the side of self-conscious mind; it is felt, not as material for causal investigation, but as responsive to the human spirit, now as living Nature, now as immanent God, now as a progressively evolving Absolute. Here, with various qualifications, we may class Heraclitus, the Stoics, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel. In the third type, the focus of interest and the determining source of philosophic ideas is the self-conscious mind itself. It feels profoundly its own energy and power of self-determination; and it regards the objective world not as deeply at one with it, responsive to its feeling, accessible to its thought, but rather as a threatening power against which it must vindicate its spiritual freedom and build its secure spiritual home. In the philosophies of this type, personality—which the first type ignored and the second reduced to an organ of a world process—became the fundamental condition of our experience, as with Kant and Fichte, or a transcendent personal God shaping the universe to his mind, as with the Plato of the *Timæus*.

<sup>1</sup> A. E., *Imaginations and Reveries*, p. 151.

If we now consider these three types in relation to our problem, it seems evident that the second and the third are naturally more congenial to poetry than the first. Yet we know that one of the greatest of Roman poets made it the work of his life to expound the atomic Naturalism of Epicurus to an unreceptive Roman world. The *De Rerum Natura* was not, like the *Essay on Man*, the attempt of a consummate writer to clothe in elegant dress philosophic ideas which he only half understood and which he abandoned in alarm when they threatened to be dangerous. Lucretius was the poet but also the prophet of Epicureanism, and it is among the prophets of the faiths by which men live and die that we must seek a parallel to the passionate earnestness with which he proclaims to Memmius the saving gospel of Epicurus—to that same Memmius who a few years later showed his piety to Epicurus's memory by destroying his house. But Lucretius felt and thought also as a poet, and in the temper of poetry. He was not 'lending his pen' to a good cause, nor turning Greek science into Latin hexameters in order that it might be more vividly grasped or more readily remembered. He was conquering a new way in poetry, as his master (according to his pious faith) had done in thought; striking out a virgin path which no foot before his had trod, as Epicurus had soared beyond the flaming walls of the world in the lonely and victorious quest for truth. And he calls on the Muses for aid with as devout a faith in his poetic mission as Milton had when he summoned Urania or some greater Muse to be his guide while he essayed 'things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'.

The atomic system of Democritus, which Epicurus adopted as his account of the world, was a magnificent contribution to physical science, and the fertility of its essential idea is still unexhausted. The problems of mind and life, of ethic and religion and art, it touched only in so far as it resolved mind and all its activities into functions of matter and motion, death into disintegration of elements, and divine agency into an idle dream. But these negations were precisely what commended the doctrine to Epicurus. A saintly recluse, bent only upon showing mankind how to live a life of serene and cheerful virtue, he took over the doctrine of the great physicist of Abdêra, as that which promised most effectual relief from disturbing superstitions. He might have gone to the great Athenian idealists of the previous century, the immortal masters not only of those who know, but of those who think and labour and create, whether in science or in poetry or in citizenship; but his aim was precisely to liberate from these distracting energies, and allure a weary



generation from the forum and the workshop, even the studio of letters or of art, the strenuous laboratories of science, and the temples of the gods, into the choice seclusion of his garden, the garden of a secular monasticism, secure from fear, and fragrant with innocent and beautiful things. Such a secular monasticism has charms for the modern spirit, in some of its phases, too; and M. Anatole France has described a latter-day Epicurean garden even more securely barred than the old from the fever and the fret of thought. What Epicurus added of his own to Democritus's theory was an accommodation not to truth but to convenience; and the measure of his scientific ardour is given by his easy toleration of conflicting explanations of the same phenomenon, provided they did not call in the intervention of the gods: while the measure of his attachment to poetry is given by his counsel to his disciples to go past it with stopped ears, as by the Sirens' deadly song.

It was of this enemy of disturbing emotion, this quietist of paganism, this timid and debonair humanitarian, that his Roman disciple drew the magnificent and astonishing portrait which opens the *De Rerum Natura*. The Lucretian Epicurus is another Prometheus—'the Greek who, when mankind lay prostrate before the horrible apparition of Religion, first of mortals dared to face and withstand her. No legendary terror quelled him, nor thunder, nor the menacing roar of heaven; they did but kindle the more the eager courage of his soul, to be the first to break the bars of Nature's gates. So the living might of his genius prevailed; and he passed beyond the far-flaming walls of the world, and traversed in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe, returning thence in triumph to tell us what can, and what cannot, come into being; . . . having trampled under foot Religion who once crushed mankind, and lifted mankind in turn by his victory up to the height of heaven.'<sup>1</sup>

One might well surmise that a philosophy which a poet could thus ardently proclaim was itself, after all, not without some of the seeds or springs of poetry; and that Lucretius, in choosing to expound it in verse, was not staking everything on his power of making good, by brilliant surface decoration or eloquent digressions, radical defects of substance. No doubt there are passages enough in his poem where poetic substance and decorative surface seem equally wanting. But perhaps we yield too implicitly to the spell of Homer and of Aristotle, or, it may be, to that of Lessing or Mommsen, if with the last-named we declare Lucretius's choice of subject 'a blunder'.<sup>2</sup> Rather, we can

<sup>1</sup> *De Rer. Nat.* i. 63-79.

<sup>2</sup> *Röm. Gesch.* V. xii. 595. Goethe, to speak only of German critics, was of



discern under much scholastic obstruction and irrelevance the outlines of a colossal epic of the universe, of which the protagonist is Man, and wanting neither in the heroic exultations nor in the tragic dooms, neither in the melancholy over what passes nor in the triumph over what endures, which go to the making of the greatest epic. And these qualities had one of their roots in the atomic theory of Democritus itself, at first sight so unpromising for poetry.

For his theory was, in effect, and probably in intention, a device for overcoming that dilemma on the horns of which early Greek thought found itself so desperately impaled, the antithesis of the One and the Many. The Eleatics had declared that pure Being was alone real, denying Change and Motion; Heraclitus declared that nothing was real but Change, and the only perpetuity 'flux'. His rival Democritus showed that it was possible to hold change and permanence to be equally real by supposing the world of the senses, where all things die and are born, to be composed of uncreated and indestructible elements. Underlying the ceaseless fluctuations of Nature and life as we see them, lay a continuity of eternal substance, of which they were the passing modes—one of the greatest of philosophical conceptions, as Santayana has called it,<sup>1</sup> but also one appealing profoundly to the specifically poetic intuition which I have described. Whether the permanent, apprehended through the flux of sense, be a spiritual substance like Plato's ideas, or Shelley's 'white radiance of eternity', or whether it be the constant Form and Function of the flowing river, as in Wordsworth's last Duddon sonnet, or whether, as here, it be a background of material particles perpetually combining and resolved, we have the kind of intuition which gives the thrill of poetry; we discover 'sweep in the concise, and depth in the clear'; infinite perspectives open out in the moment and in the point, and, however remote as yet the temper and the conclusions of Spinozan mysticism may be, we yet in some sort see things 'in the light of eternity'.

In Lucretius this conception found a mind capable of being ravished by its imaginative grandeur, as well as of pursuing it indefatigably

another opinion. His own choice of subject in poems like the *Metamorphose der Pflanzen* was closely analogous, and he recognized with high appreciation Lucretius's extraordinary gifts—cognate with his own—of intuition (*Anschaung*) and imagination, enabling him to 'describe with power' and to 'explore beyond the reach of the senses the mysterious recesses of Nature'; in other words, gifts which found peculiar scope in dealing with the subject which Lucretius actually chose. Cf. Goethe's letter to v. Knebel, the first German translator of the *De Rer. Nat.*, Feb. 14, 1821, *Werke*, ed. Hempel, xxix. 537.

<sup>1</sup> Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, to which this essay owes several suggestions.

through the thorniest mazes of mechanical proof. The contagious fervour which breathes through his poem is not the mere ardour of the disciple bent on winning a convert, nor the joy of the literary craftsman as his hexameters leap forth glowing on the anvil: it is the sacred passion of one who has had a sublime vision of life and nature, and who bears about the radiance of it into all the work to which he has set his hand. It is not because of anything that Lucretius adds to Epicurus—in explicit doctrine he really adds nothing at all—that the impression produced by his poem differs so greatly from that of all we know—in fragments and at second-hand, it is true—of Epicurus's own writings. The ultimate principles are the same, but the accent is laid at different points. The parochial timidities of Epicurus have left their traces on the Roman's page; but they appear as hardly more than rudimentary survivals among the native inspirations of a man of heroic mettle and valour and Roman tenacity and force of will. He is not able quite to break free even from speculative foibles which show the Master's shallow opportunism at its worst; he repeats the dictum that the sun is about as large as it looks, a lamp hung a little above the earth, and daily lighted and put out; but he becomes himself when he lets his imagination soar into the infinities of Time and Space which his faith opens out or leaves room for. It is a triumph of poetry as well as of common sense when he scoffs at the Stoic dogma of a Space which abruptly comes to an end; when he stations an archer at the supposed terminus and ironically bids him shoot his arrow into the hypothetical nothingness beyond. Or in more sombre mood, how grave an intensity he puts into a common thought like that of the end of life by the sublimely terrible epithet *immortal* which he applies to death:

Mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit (iii. 869),  
or into a mere reminder that birth and death are always with us, by making us hear the continuous succession, through the ages, of funeral laments and wailings of the newly-born (iii. 578). He accepts without question the swerving of the atoms, devised by Epicurus—child and man of genius at once—to refute the Stoic dogma of necessity; but what possesses his mind and imagination is not these intrusions of caprice, but the great continuities and uniformities of existence, which follow from the perpetual dissolution and re-making of life:

‘Rains die, when father ether has tumbled them into the lap of mother earth; but then goodly crops spring up and trees laden with fruit; and by them we and the beasts are fed, and glad towns teem with children and the woods ring with the song of young birds’ (i. 250 f.).



Only, as such passages show, Lucretius grasps these uniformities and continuities not as theoretic abstractions, but as underlying conditions of the teeming multiplicity and joyous profusion of living Nature. His senses, imagination, and philosophic intellect, all phenomenally acute and alert, wrought intimately together; and he enters into and exposes the life of the individual thing with an intensity of insight and a realistic precision and power which burn its image upon our brain, without ever relaxing our consciousness that it is yet part of an endless process and the incidental expression of law.

None the less, his conception of the nature of the process itself does insensibly undergo a change. The hidden flaw in his system could not but, with an exponent so richly endowed and so transparently sincere, at some point disturb its imposing coherence. Atomism could not explain life, and life poured with too abounding a tide through the heart and brain of Lucretius not to undermine in some degree the authority of his mechanical calculus, and to lend a surreptitious persuasiveness to analogies derived from the animated soul. Without ostensibly disturbing the integrity of his Epicurean creed, such analogies have, in two ways, infused an alien colour into his poetry and alien implications into his thought. In the first place, he feels, as abounding natures will, that life—‘the mere living’—is somehow very good, in spite of all the evils it brings in its train, and death pathetic, in spite of the evils from which it sets us free. When he is demonstrating that the world cannot have been made by gods, he sets forth its grave flaws of structure and arrangement with merciless trenchancy—‘*tanta stat praedita culpa*’ (v. 199); and, like Lear, he makes the new-born child wail because he is come into a world where so many griefs await him. And no one ever urged with more passionate eloquence that it is unreasonable to fear to die. None the less, phrases charged with a different feeling about life continually escape him. To begin to live is ‘to rise up into the divine borders of light’ (i. 20). And secondly, despite his philosophical assurance, incessantly repeated, that birth and death are merely different aspects of the same continuous mechanical process, and that nothing receives life except by the death of something else,<sup>1</sup> he cannot suppress the suggestion that the creative energy of the world is akin to that which, with conscious will and desire, brings forth the successive generations of man. And so, in the astonishing and magnificent opening address

<sup>1</sup> Alid ex alio reficit natura, nec ullam  
rem gigni patitur, nisi morte adiuta aliena.



to Venus (i. 1 f.), the poet who was about to demonstrate that the gods lived eternally remote from the life of men calls upon the legendary mother of his own race, as the divine power ever at work in this teeming universe, the giver of increase, bringing all things to birth, from the simplest corn-blade to the might and glory of the Roman Empire.

So grave and impressive an appeal cannot be treated as mere rhetorical ornament. If we call it figure, it is figure of the kind which is not a 'poetical' substitute for exact description, but conveys something for which no other terms are adequate. The great symbol of Venus rendered his vehement apprehension of the life of Nature with more veracity than that calculus of atomic movements which he was about to expound, and by which his logical intellect with perfect sincerity believed it to be explained.

Far less astonishing than his bold rehabilitation of the goddess of Love is his fetishistic feeling for the Earth, the legendary Mother of men. For him, too, as for *primaeval* myth, she is the 'universal mother',<sup>1</sup> who in her fresh youth brought forth flower and tree, and bird and beast; from whose body sprang at length the race of man itself; nay, he tells us how the infants crept forth 'from wombs rooted in the soil', and how, wherever this happened, earth yielded naturally through her pores a liquor most like to milk, 'even as nowadays every woman when she has borne is filled with sweet milk, because all that current of nutriment streams toward the breast'.

But if Lucretius in such passages goes even beyond the most implicit modern attribution of personality to Nature, his feeling is at another point sharply marked off from that of Wordsworth, for instance, or Meredith. His Earth is veritably mother, but she is not benign; she has brought forth the teeming life which possesses her, but she does not love her children, nor mould their forms by silent sympathy, nor nourish their manhood from her 'well of strength'.

For the Earth is not only our Mother; she is our tomb (ii. 1148 f.). And the eternal energy of creation is not only matched by the eternal energy of dissolution, but here and now is actually yielding ground to it. The Earth, so prolific in her joyous youth, is now like a woman who has ceased to bear, 'worn out by length of days'. In the whole universe birth and death absolutely balance, the equation of mechanical value is never infringed; the universe has no history, only a continuous substitution of terms. But each living thing has a history; it knows the exultation of onset and the melancholy of decline; nor is its fear

<sup>1</sup> v. 788 f. His 'scientific' mind about Earth is expressed in ii. 652 f.

of death cancelled by the knowledge that in that very moment, and in consequence of that fact, some other living thing will be born. And Lucretius, feeling for our earth as a living thing, and one very near to us and deeply involved in all the issues of our existence, does not suggest that some other Earth elsewhere is now on the threshold of being. She has for him a history, and the joy and pathos of history, and he forgets that she is a mechanical term. To say that he puts the 'Nevermore' of romantic sentimentality in the place of the dispassionate 'give and take' of mechanics would do wrong to the immense virility which animates every line of this athlete among poets. Of the cheap melancholy of discontent he knows as little as of the cheap satisfaction of complacency, or of that literary melancholy where the sigh of Horace, or Ronsard, or Herrick, over the passing of roses and all other beautiful things covers a sly diplomatic appeal to the human rosebud to be gathered while still there is time. No, the melancholy of Lucretius is like that of Dürer's *Melancholia*, the sadness of strong intellect and far-reaching vision as it contemplates the setting of the sun of time and the ebbing of the tides of mortality; or like Wordsworth's mournful music of dissolution, only to be heard by an ear emancipated from vulgar joys and fears; or like the melancholy of Keats—the veiled goddess who hath her shrine in the very temple of delight,—the *amari aliquid*, in Lucretius's own yet more pregnant words, which lurks in the very sweetness of the flower.

#### IV

The naturalism of Democritus and Epicurus, then, though framed purely in the interest of scientific explanation, and hostile both to poetry and to religion as commonly understood, was in essence a great poetic discovery, the disclosure of a World-view wholly novel and of entrancing appeal to the poetic apprehension. The sublime perspectives of an illimitable universe, the permanent oneness underlying the changing shows of sense: these were contributions of philosophy to a poetic outlook of which no poet had yet dreamed, and which it was reserved for the greatest of philosophic poets to make explicitly his own.

But the system was not thus responsive to poetry at all points; and we have seen Lucretius the poet involuntarily creating an atmosphere of passion and pathos, attachment, regret not dreamt of in his philosophy. And there are signs enough that had that philosophy admitted, what it fiercely denied, those ideas of a living and personal or even divine Nature, or of a universe pervaded by God, which



respond to poetic apprehension at the point where the Epicurean naturalism left it, as it were in the lurch, he would have eagerly embraced them.

Now it was precisely those ideas of life and personality present in Nature, or even pervading the universe, which prevailed among philosophic thinkers of the *second type*, who inquired (to put it in the roughest way) not how the world might have come about, but what it meant. For the answer, infinitely varied in its terms, uniformly postulated that the idealism of man reflected something answering to it in the very nature of reality. Two profound suggestions towards an ideal conception of the world, thrown out by the genius of Greece, could still intoxicate the intellect of early nineteenth-century Germany:—the Heraclitean idea of the harmony of opposites, and the Platonic and Stoic doctrine of the soul of the world. Of the first I say nothing more here; for Heraclitus, pregnant as his dark sayings are with poetry, has never had his Lucretius.<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of a world-soul, on the other hand, has again and again helped poetry to articulate her rapturous apprehension of the glory of the world. For European speculation, at least, the conception had its origin in the *Timæus*, where the last perfecting touch of the divinely-appointed artificer who constructs the world is to give it a ‘soul’ and make it ‘a blessed god’.

In the pantheism of the Stoics, the idea of a divine world-soul set forth in this grandiose myth became a radical dogma, one of the chief sources of their significance as an intellectual and moral force. At Rome the Stoic pantheism softened the rigour of national and social distinctions. The humanity of the Roman law lies in the direct line of its influence. In the mind of the most sensitive and tender of Roman poets, on the other hand, the Stoic idea fell upon a soil rich in qualities uncongenial, if not unknown, to its native habitat. Stoic thought in Vergil, no less than Epicurean in Lucretius, has taken the colour of that richer soil. The sublime verses which he puts in the mouth of Anchises have riveted this solution, if such it be, of the world-riddle upon the mind of posterity; but the real contribution of Vergil is less in any expressive phrase or image than in the diffused magic of a temperament in which all subtle and delicate attachments wonderfully thrived; where, more than in any other Roman mind, the ‘threefold reverence’ of Goethe, the reverence for what is

<sup>1</sup> His famous illustration, quoted by Plato, is the harmony of the lyre brought about by the balance of opposite forces in the strings. Plut. *Is. et Osir.* (quot. Ritter and Preller, p. 17), Plat. *Symp.*, p. 187.



above us, for what is below us, and for our fellow-men, found its congenial home.

And it is not hard to see how sheer poetic instinct drew him this way. His two great masters in poetry, Homer and Lucretius, had inspired and helped to mould a genius fundamentally unlike either. The majestic pageant of the Olympians was not at bottom more consonant to his poetry than the scorn which tramples on all fear of divinity and puts the roar of Acheron under its feet. The Jupiter and Venus and Juno and Pallas who so efficiently order the changing fortunes of Aeneas are but a splendid decoration, like the Olympian figures in Raphael's frescoes at the Farnesina. And well as he understands the bliss of the triumphant intellect, of Man become the master of things, he is himself content with the humbler joys of one who has acquaintance with Pan and the Nymphs, with the gods of the woodland and the fountain-spring. These were real for him, not it may be with the matter-of-fact reality of the senses, but as speaking symbols of something more deeply interfused, less articulate than man, but more articulate to man's spirit than the fountains or the flowers.

The great pantheistic phrases of Vergil have echoed, we know, throughout the after-history of poetry. We might even be tempted to say that pantheism, in some sense, must be the substance of any 'poetic view of the world'. But if so, it must be a pantheism which owes at least as much to the entranced intuition of the poets as to the abstract thinking of philosophy. Their ecstasy of the senses, their feasting joy in the moment, and in the spot, have enabled them not merely to express the creed of pantheism with greater freshness and sincerity, but to give it interpretations and applications of which theoretic speculation never dreamed. We should not prize the great lines of *Tintern Abbey* so far above the eloquent platitudes of the *Essay on Man* if we did not feel that Pope was merely putting philosophy at second-hand into brilliant verse, while Wordsworth had not only reached his thought through his own impassioned contemplation, but actually given it a new compass and profundity not attainable by any logical process. He found his 'something more deeply interfused' as he looked with emotion too deep for tears upon the humble flower and the simple village child, or remembered the experiences of his own wonderful boyhood; and these were for him not merely portions of a body of which God was the soul, but themselves luminous points, or running springs, of spiritual light and life. So that if his poetry touches doctrinal pantheism (which he never names) at one pole, at the other it is nearer to the spiritual fetishism of St. Francis's hymns to Brother Sun and Brother Rain.

It is easier to distinguish definite philosophic ideas at work in the poetic apprehension of Shelley. We know in any case that they played an immensely greater part in his intellectual growth. Plato and Dante have helped him to those wonderful phrases in which he seeks to make articulate his rapturous cosmic vision of

That light, whose smile kindles the universe,  
That Beauty in which all things work and move,

that sustaining love  
Which thro' the web of Being blindly wove,  
In man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
Burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of  
The fire for which all thirst.

That is his rendering, translated out of theological terms, of the sublime opening lines of the *Paradiso* :

‘The glory of Him who moves the whole, penetrates through the universe and is reflected in one part more and in another less.’

But, even so, Shelley is feeling through these great words—Light, Love, Beauty—towards something which none of them can completely convey. And in this Shelleyan ‘love’ itself, the subtle distinctions carried out, as we saw, by Dante disappear even more completely than the dramatic play of thought in the *Symposium* disappears in the suffused splendour of Spenser’s *Hymns*. In logical power Shelley was as little to be compared with Dante as Spenser with Plato. Yet some distinctions seem to assert themselves even in that ecstatic love-interwoven universe of his. His poet’s intense consciousness of personality sounds clear through the pantheistic harmonies. When he is trying to utter as he sees it the sublime paradox of the dead but deathless poet, he falls successively, heedless of inconsistency, upon symbols drawn from the dogmas of antagonistic schools of thought. Pantheism, individual immortality, heaven, Elysium—he draws upon them all, but none suffices. The dead poet is made one with Nature, becomes a part of the loveliness which once he made more lovely; his voice is heard in the nightingale’s song. But he is also an individual soul, who has passed at death to the abode where the Immortals are, and is welcomed there by Chatterton and Sidney and Lucan and the rest. A cognate depth and reach of apprehension has perplexed the discoverers of contradiction in *In Memoriam*. ‘For the poets’, aptly comments Mr. Bradley, though he is thinking chiefly of Shelley and Tennyson, ‘the soul of the dead in being mingled with nature does not lose its personality; in living in God it remains human and itself.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *A Commentary on In Memoriam*, Introd.



In comparison with the magnificent audacities of pantheism and cosmic love, the philosophic conception of 'Nature' has enjoyed the position of a great authoritative commonplace, by invoking which the most mediocre poet could dignify and quicken his verse. It belonged to science as much as to poetry, and to the poetry of clarified good sense by as good right as to that of childlike intuition. It could stand for the ideal of just expression which Pope counselled the poet 'first to follow', as legitimately as, a century later, it was to stand for the living presence of Beauty, of whose 'wedding' with the soul Wordsworth chanted the spousal verse, or as the teeming creative energy whose infinity Faust sought vainly to clasp. But even that Augustan 'Nature' gathered something from the quality of the minds which pursued literary discipline by its light, and no one doubts that in Wordsworth or in Goethe the *φύσις* or *natura* of strictly philosophic speculation was but the fecund germ of a poetic creation, which, whether it answered to a cosmic reality or not, answered to deep-seated and ineffaceable instincts and needs of man. Only, if great and original genius has set its hall-mark upon this noble metal, the crowd of small poets have mixed it with their feeble alloys. There is a Nature which responds to the greatest and sublimest aspirations of man, and one which answers to his self-indulgent dreams; a Nature which is wedded to his soul, and one which is but the casual mistress of his light desires. If the term 'poetical' has a slightly derisive air, it is because a cheap glamour, which disguises truth, so often replaces the profound symbol which touches its core. A truly 'poetic' World-view has at any rate nothing to do with this second-rate romance.

Among the poetic ways of regarding *Nature*, there are two types, the distinction between which concerns us. It is shadowed forth in the two images I borrowed just now from Wordsworth and from *Faust*. We may feel Nature as intimately united to us, deep calling to deep. Or we may feel it as something which eludes our clasp, but holds us by the very appeal of its infinity to that which is infinite in ourselves. The first type is too familiar to be further discussed here. But the second, or Goethean type, needs a few words.

For it was with Goethe that a new and powerful philosophic influence tardily entered modern poetry—the influence of Spinoza. A quarter of a century before Wordsworth and Coleridge were overheard talking of him at Nether Stowey, Spinoza had found deep springs of sympathy in the young Goethe. A vivid passage in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Book XIV) tells us that what especially fascinated him was 'the boundless unselfishness that glowed in every sentence', and notably that 'strange sentence' which later suggested



a famous retort of his Philine—‘He who loves God must not expect that God shall love him in return’.<sup>1</sup> Spinoza’s God meant, roughly, the infinity of Nature, and to love God meant to see all things in the light of that infinity. Such a dictum therefore cut at the root of the whole body of poetry which asserted an answering spirit in Nature, from the self-indulgent dreams of romantic sentiment to the love-interwoven universe of Dante or Shelley. The grandeur of Spinoza’s conception is apparent enough even in his geometrical formulas, but Goethe’s intense intuition translated it into human experiences which stir us to the depths. The Erdgeist’s retort to Faust—‘Du gleichst dem Geist den du begreifst, nicht mir’—is one of the most thrilling in all poetry, not because it indulges all our wishes, nor yet because it baffles them, but because the barrier it opposes to the intellect is a gate to the imagination, and we step out into a poetic apprehension of the infinity which our formulas seek to capture in vain.

It is by a like suggestion of infinities beyond our reach and untouched by our emotions that he moves us in poems like *Das Göttliche* or *Die Grenzen der Menschheit*, or the opening scene of the Second Part of *Faust*, which insist with so lofty a calm on our limitations. From these infinities, if we wish to live and act, we must turn away, and that is what, as a wise physician, Goethe bids us do. The intolerable glory of the sun is broken up for us in the many-hued rainbow, and this refracted light must be the guide of our life. But no one could see life there who had not himself gazed on the glory of the sun, and while we read Goethe’s words we evade the very limitations he imposes, just as Shelley (in the great kindred passage), by the very image which condemns life as a dome of many-coloured glass, lifts us into the ‘white radiance’ beyond. ‘A little ring bounds our life,’ he says elsewhere, ‘and many generations succeed one another on the endless chain of their being.’ A little ring on an endless chain—a ‘little life rounded with a sleep’,—that way lies a poetry as great as that which comes to the visionary Celt who sees ‘waving round every leaf and tree the fiery tresses of that hidden sun which is the soul of the earth’.<sup>2</sup>

But that way, also, lies a poetry of Man, a poetry which has its sustaining centre not in the cosmos, but in the soul. To refuse the easy assumption of Nature’s comradeship in our sorrow, to resign the cheap consolations of the ‘pathetic fallacy’, may be the way not merely to resignation, or Stoicism, but to an apprehension of the

<sup>1</sup> *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, iv. 9.

<sup>2</sup> A. E., *The Renewal of Youth*.

heights and depths of the soul thrown back upon itself, and fetching strength not from any outer power, but from undreamed-of inner resources of its own. When Wordsworth, in the grasp of a great sorrow, puts aside the glamour of the poet's dream, in order to bear with fortitude 'what is to be borne', he has taken a step towards that poetry. When he finds in suffering 'the nature of infinity', with gracious avenues opening out of it to wondrous regions of soul life, he has entered it.<sup>1</sup>

## V

We have thus watched the modification, first of the naturalistic atomism, then of the cosmic conceptions of 'pantheism' and 'Nature', by the immediate intuition, the eager senses, and the vivid soul-consciousness which characterize the poetic apprehension. It remains to glance, finally, at the relations of poetry with that third type of philosophic system, in which soul-consciousness itself has played the guiding and master part.

It was with the assertion of the soul's predominance that European philosophy, in the full sense of the word, began. When Socrates turned from the cosmic speculations of the Ionians to found his 'thinking-shop' at Athens, and chaffed Anaxagoras for having put mind at the head of things and then given it nothing to do, he was preparing the way, we know, for the magnificent soul-sovereignty established by the master of all idealists. Plato set up a trenchant dualism between soul and sense, and thrust the sense-world into a limbo of disparagement from which, where his spell prevailed, it never emerged. The body was the soul's prison; the senses cheated it with illusion and dragged it down with base desires.

The Transcendentalists of modern Germany established a soul-autocracy differently conceived, and founded upon other postulates, but not less absolute. Kant shattered the claims of *Verstand*, but only to enthrone *Vernunft*; Fichte found nothing real and nothing good that was not rooted in heroic will; Schopenhauer built up a philosophy of self-effacement and world-flight on the doctrine that the will to live which tortures us is also the malign indwelling energy of the world. And none of them surpassed in calm audacity the claims made for individual reason by Fichte's English contemporary, Godwin.

Speculation of this type was already allied to poetry by the boldness of its 'subjective idealism', and it might be expected that its

<sup>1</sup> The lines from *The Borderers* are in fact, of course, earlier than those from *Peele Castle*.



points of fruitful contact with poetry would be correspondingly numerous. Yet this is hardly, on the whole, the case. If Plato's influence on poetry is hard to measure, if Kant brought something vital to Schiller, and Schopenhauer to Wagner, 'subjective' philosophers and poets in the main pursued their common preoccupation with soul along paths which rarely crossed. Each brought to the exploration of that marvellous mine a lamp of extraordinary power; but they carried it into different regions, surveyed them on different methods, and returned with different results. Poets without any scientific psychology have, in virtue of imaginative insight into the ways of character, created a mass of psychological material with which scientific psychology has only begun to cope. It is only among poetic portrayers of the second rank, such as Jonson and the allegorists, that theoretic categories of character have had any determining weight. The supreme characters of literature are true creations, creations that are at the same time discoveries—pieces of humanity which exceed Nature's 'reach', perhaps, but not her 'grasp'. Prometheus, Hamlet, Satan, Faust, permanently enlarged the status of the human soul in our common valuation of life. That 'discovery of Man' which intoxicated the Renaissance was pre-eminently a discovery of the stature of man's soul—'how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, . . . in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!' but philosophic ideas hardly touched the surface of either Shakespeare or Marlowe, and they furnished but one strand in the woof of the mind of Milton.

In the English poetry of the time of Wordsworth there is more affinity to philosophic ideas, but their actual influence is apt to be strongest just where the poetry itself is least intense. In a very luminous lecture Mr. Bradley has traced the relation between the two movements.<sup>1</sup> An exalted faith in soul possessed and inspired both, but each was in the main unconscious of the other. In the poetry of his own countryman, Schiller, Kant's austere ideas reappear transformed in the crucible of the poet's livelier emotions or quicker sense of beauty. Coleridge drank as deeply of Kantian and cognate ideas, but only when the brief chapter of his own poetry was all but closed; while the magnificent prose-poem in which Carlyle conveyed the philosophy of Fichte-Jean Paul-Teufelsdröckh stands alone. What Wordsworth may have drawn through Coleridge's talk is not clearly distinguishable from the original bent of his own mind. The two streams ran courses largely parallel, but in distinct though adjacent

<sup>1</sup> *English Poetry and German Philosophy in the Age of Wordsworth* (Manchester University Press).



valleys. With Godwin's ideas, on the other hand, both Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley had stood in close intellectual relations. And these were precisely the men whose poetry set the deepest impress upon their view of life.

Is it possible by the help of either the parallel or the derivative relationship to lay down any common features in the process?

In the first place, the stress on the exaltation of spirit is shifted by the poets, and with great emphasis, from 'reason', the instrument of philosophy, to imagination. Reason is constantly not merely ignored but openly slighted. It is not what they mean when they exalt 'mind'. When Wordsworth tells us, in the great *Recluse* passage, of the awe, beyond Empyrean or Erebus, with which he contemplated 'the mind of man'; when he sees the heroic devotion of the fallen Toussaint perpetuated in 'man's unconquerable mind'; when he encourages those who doubted Spanish heroism with the sublime assurance that 'the true sorrow of humanity consists in this: not that the mind of man fails, but that the course and demands of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires';—by this 'mind' he means imagination, passion, heroic will, but not discourse of reason. Wordsworth, apprehending soul with his poet's intuition, apprehends it as he knew it in himself. He saw it, therefore, as an energy operating not through 'meddling intellect' but through vision and vision-illuminated will, with open eye and ear for its indispensable associates, and love as its core. The 'soul' whereby alone the nations shall be great and free was something in which the humblest peasant and the simplest child had part, and in which the meanest flower struck answering chords. It is not accident that the soul-animated England of Wordsworth's ideal is so widely unlike Hegel's Prussian state.

In William Blake soul-autocracy became aggressive and revolutionary, and the breach with reason, philosophic or other, widened to a yawning gulf. Whether he is declaring 'the world of imagination to be the world of eternity', scoffing at the nature-lover who sees 'with' not 'through' the eye, or affirming that 'to generalize is to be an idiot'—(a stupendous example of the procedure he derides)—he stands for a poetry stripped bare of all that allies it either to philosophy or to common sense. His prophetic books adumbrate a grandiose poetic metaphysic, a world-system framed to the postulates of this denuded poetry. And Shelley's *Apology* enthrones imagination as the creator and upholder of all civilization.

Secondly, the poetic shifting of the stress, within the domain of the autocratic soul, from reason to imagination and feeling, told power-

fully upon the ethical ideals proclaimed by this group of poets. It added fresh impetus to that disposition to override or transcend external standards of morality which is inherent in all vivid inner consciousness. Moral distinctions fade in the inner illumination of the mystic. We have seen hints of such a 'transvaluation of ethical values' disarranging the iron categories of Dante's Hell. Applied to Hamlet or Othello, the traditional categories of good and evil break in our hands. Milton's heroic devil, and the lovers whom Browning scorns for being saved by their sloth from crime, still perplex the moralist. But the poets of the Revolution are openly sceptical of morality. Of Shelley I need not speak. Even Wordsworth makes a hero of a murderer. And Blake first proclaimed explicitly, a century before Nietzsche, a good 'beyond good and evil', and figured the inauguration of this transcendent ethic in the colossal symbolism of his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

In all these writers, it is true, their attitude to morality was in part derived from the bias towards emancipation then current in all departments of ethical, social, and political life, and had no relation to specifically poetic apprehension. 'Freedom' was an ideal for Godwin and for Robespierre, as well as for Shelley and for Kant, and was pursued by them with equal devotion in their several fashions. But they all, also, understood it in the light of their several preoccupations. With Godwin, as with Robespierre, it is mainly negative; with Shelley, as with Kant, it acquires positive substance and content. And this is because both philosopher and poet see it as the means to some perfection of the soul. The soul-autocracy of the age, extravagant as it might be, is seen at its noblest in the Kantian freedom won through duty, and in the Shelleyan freedom won through Love. The Kantian ideal of freedom interpreted in that last conclusion of Goethe's wisdom—'He alone is free who daily wins his freedom anew'—has passed into the very substance of the strenuous German mind. The Shelleyan ideal is of a rarer but also of a more perilous stuff, and has touched no such chords in the English character as his music has stirred in the English ear. But something of the genius of both ideals was gathered up and concentrated in Wordsworth's great affirmation, so recklessly impugned, so magnificently borne out to-day, of the meaning of national freedom.

Wordsworth's sense of law corrects what is anarchic in Shelley, as Shelley's flame-like ardour corrects what is prosaic and common in Wordsworth. Together they present more purely than any of their contemporaries the noble substance of a poetic ethic. In that poetic ethic the greatest word, rightly understood, is still the Shelleyan Love.



And it may be that if there is any ideal which, springing from poetic apprehension, is yet fit, rightly interpreted, for the common needs of men, it is that 'love of love' on which Tennyson, so far always from the revolutionary temper either in love or poetry, set his finger in his early prime, as the sovereign endowment of the poet. Only it must be love wide enough to include every kind of spiritual energy by which the soul, transcending itself, fulfils itself, and exerts, whether upon men or nations, its liberating and uplifting power: the love which creates, and the love which endures; the love which makes the hero or the artist, and that which spends itself inexhaustibly on a thankless cause; the impersonal ardour of the mind, which Spinoza called the 'intellectual love of God', and the impassioned union of souls, which to some has seemed a clue to the vision of reality, and to others the surest pledge of a future life; the love of country which distinguishes the true service of humanity from a shallow cosmopolitanism; and the love of our fellow men, which distinguishes true patriotism from national greed. To have had no mean share in sustaining this large ideal of the 'soul' which makes us free is an enduring glory of the poets.

Nor is this strange if, as I trust this partial survey may have served to suggest, the spiritual energy transcending itself, for which Love is the most adequate name, be the core of the World-view towards which, from their various religious or philosophic vantage-grounds, a number of poetic master-spirits have made an approach. Whether they have found it as a light kindling the universe, like Dante and Shelley; or as a creative power shadowed forth in the eternal new birth of all things, like Lucretius; or as the will and passion of the human soul, heroically shaping its fate, and divining its infinity most clearly when most aware of its limitations, like Goethe; in some form the faith that spiritual energy is the heart of reality was the centre towards which they knowingly or obscurely strove. Such a faith, I suggest, will be found to be a vital constituent of every view of the world reached by a poet through his poetic experience, and the main contribution of that rich, profound, and intense form of experience to man's ultimate interpretation of life.



## SUMMARY

View of the World, or 'World-view', defined. Distinction of *religious* and *philosophical* World-views. The present essay attempts to define and describe a *poetic* World-view.—I. Character of poetic experience. Types of belief about Man and Nature to which it predisposes. Though rarely detached from religious or philosophical presumptions, it habitually modifies them, and the method here proposed is to study, in some salient examples, the character and direction of these modifications (p. 2).—II. (i) Modifications of *religious* World-views by the poetic inspirations of Personality and Love. HOMER. AESCHYLUS. DANTE (p. 6).—III. (ii) Modifications of *philosophical* World-views: (a) Materialistic schools. Epicureanism and LUCRETIVS (p. 14).—IV. (b) 'Objective idealisms'. Stoic pantheism and VERGIL. WORDSWORTH. SHELLEY. Philosophic doctrine of 'Nature' in WORDSWORTH, and in GOETHE. SPINOZA and GOETHE (p. 21).—V. (c) 'Subjective idealisms'. 'Mind' in the philosophers and in the poets of the age of WORDSWORTH. The poets subordinate (1) the rational to the emotional and imaginative factors of soul: WORDSWORTH, BLAKE, SHELLEY, and (2) moral categories to a good 'beyond good and evil'. Of this poetic ethic the most vital constituent is Love; and Love, comprehensively understood, will be an intrinsic element of every World-view won through poetic experience (p. 27).



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